Classification of Wetlands and Deepwater Habitats of the United States

by

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Abstract

This classification, to be used in a new inventory of wetlands and deepwater habitats of the United States, is intended to describe ecological taxa, arrange them in a system useful to resource managers, furnish units for mapping, and provide uniformity of concepts and terms. Wetlands are defined by plants (hydrophytes), soils (hydric soils), and frequency of flooding. Ecologically related areas of deep water, traditionally not considered wetlands, are included in the classification as deepwater habitats.

Systems form the highest level of the classification hierarchy; five are defined—Marine, Estuarine, Riverine, Lacustrine, and Palustrine. Marine and Estuarine Systems each have two Subsystems, Subtidal and Intertidal; the Riverine System has four Subsystems, Tidal, Lower Perennial, Upper Perennial, and Intermittent; the Lacustrine has two, Littoral and Limnetic; and the Palustrine has no Subsystems.

Within the Subsystems, Classes are based on substrate material and flooding regime, or on vegetative life form. The same Classes may appear under one or more of the Systems or Subsystems. Six Classes are based on substrate and flooding regime: (1) Rock Bottom with a substrate of bedrock, boulders, or stones; (2) Unconsolidated Bottom with a substrate of cobbles, gravel, sand, mud, or organic material; (3) Rocky Shore with the same substrates as Rock Bottom; (4) Unconsolidated Shore with the same substrates as Unconsolidated Bottom; (5) Streambed with any of the substrates; and (6) Reef with a substrate composed of the living and dead remains of invertebrates (corals, mollusks, or worms). The bottom Classes, (1) and (2) above, are flooded all or most of the time and the shore Classes, (3) and (4), are exposed most of the time. The Class Streambed is restricted to channels of intermittent streams and tidal channels that are dewatered at low tide. The life form of the dominant vegetation defines the five Classes based on vegetative form: (1) Aquatic Bed, dominated by plants that grow principally on or below the surface of the water; (2) Moss–Lichen Wetland, dominated by mosses or lichens; (3) Emergent Wetland, dominated by emergent herbaceous angiosperms; (4) Scrub–Shrub Wetland, dominated by shrubs or small trees; and (5) Forested Wetland, dominated by large trees.

The Dominance Type, which is named for the dominant plant or animal forms, is the lowest level of the classification hierarchy. Only examples are provided for this level; Dominance Types must be developed by individual users of the classification.

Modifying terms applied to the Classes or Subclasses are essential for use of the system. In tidal areas, the type and duration of flooding are described by four Water Regime Modifiers: subtidal, irregularly exposed, regularly flooded, and irregularly flooded. In nontidal areas, eight Regimes are used: permanently flooded, intermittently exposed, semipermanently flooded, seasonally flooded, saturated, temporarily flooded, intermittently flooded, and artificially flooded. A hierarchical system

of Water Chemistry Modifiers, adapted from the Venice System, is used to describe the salinity of the water. Fresh waters are further divided on the basis of pH. Use of a hierarchical system of soil modifiers taken directly from U.S. soil taxonomy is also required. Special modifiers are used where appropriate: excavated, impounded, diked, partly drained, farmed, and artificial.

Regional differences important to wetland ecology are described through a regionalization that combines a system developed for inland areas by R. G. Bailey in 1976 with our Marine and Estuarine provinces.

The structure of the classification allows it to be used at any of several hierarchical levels. Special data required for detailed application of the system are frequently unavailable, and thus data gathering may be prerequisite to classification. Development of rules by the user will be required for specific map scales. Dominance Types and relationships of plant and animal communities to environmental characteristics must also be developed by users of the classification. Keys to the Systems and Classes are furnished as a guide, and numerous wetlands and deepwater habitats are illustrated and classified. The classification system is also compared with several other systems currently in use in the United States.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service conducted an inventory of the wetlands of the United States (Shaw and Fredine 1956) in 1954. Since then, wetlands have undergone considerable change, both natural and man related, and their characteristics and natural values have become better defined and more widely known. During this interval, State and Federal legislation has been passed to protect wetlands, and some Statewide wetland surveys have been conducted.

In 1974, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service directed its Office of Biological Services to design and conduct a new National inventory of wetlands. Whereas the single purpose of the 1954 inventory was to assess the amount and types of valuable waterfowl habitat, the scope of the new project is considerably broader (Montanari and Townsend 1977). It will provide basic data on the characteristics and extent of the Nation's wetlands and deepwater habitats and should facilitate the management of these areas on a sound, multiple-use basis.

Before the 1954 inventory was begun, Martin et al. (1953) had devised a wetland classification system to serve as a framework for the National inventory. The results of the inventory and an illustrated description of the 20 wetland types were published as U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service *Circular 39* (Shaw and Fredine 1956). This circular has been one of the most common and most influential documents used in the continuous battle to preserve a critically valuable but rapidly diminishing National resource (Stegman 1976). However, the shortcomings of this work are well known (e.g., see Leitch 1966; Stewart and Kantrud 1971).

In attempting to simplify their classification, Martin et al. (1953) not only ignored ecologically critical differences, such as the distinction between fresh and mixosaline inland wetlands but also placed dissimilar habitats, such as forests of boreal black spruce (*Picea mariana*) and of southern cypress-gum (*Taxodium distichum-Nyssa aquatica*) in the same category, with no provisions in the system for distinguishing between them. Because of the central emphasis on waterfowl habitat, far greater attention was paid to vegetated areas than to nonvegetated areas. Probably the greatest single disadvantage of the Martin et al. system was the inadequate definition of types, which led to inconsistencies in application.

Numerous other classifications of wetlands and deepwater habitats have been developed (Stewart and Kantrud 1971; Golet and Larson 1974; Jeglum et al. 1974; Odum ėt al. 1974; Zoltai et al. 1975; Millar 1976), but most of these are regional systems and none would fully satisfy National needs. Because of the weaknesses inherent in *Circular 39*, and because wetland ecology has become significantly better understood since 1954, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service elected to construct a new National classification system as the first step toward a new National inventory. The new classification, presented here, has been designed to meet four long-range objectives: (1) to describe ecological units that have certain homogeneous natural attributes; (2) to arrange these units in a system that will aid decisions about resource management; (3) to furnish units for inventory and mapping; and (4) to provide uniformity in concepts and terminology throughout the United States.

Scientific and common names of plants (Appendix A) and animals (Appendix B) were taken from various sources cited in the text. No attempt has been made to resolve nomenclatorial problems where there is a taxonomic dispute. Many of the terms used in this classification have various meanings even in the scientific literature and in some instances our use of terms is new. We have provided a glossary (Appendix C) to guide the reader in our usage of terms.